

# **“Resiliency 101: From Victim to Survivor”**

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Some victims of childhood abuse perpetuate the cycle of violence while others grow to be safe, nurturing adults. Many choose to become the rescuers and healers—social workers, child advocates, prosecutors, therapists, physicians and police officers. Why do some victims end up being re-victimized or becoming perpetrators while others turn out to be healthy, stable, well functioning adults? How can we influence which path they will choose?

This workshop identifies seven key steps to becoming a resilient survivor—factors that help a victim to overcome trauma and to develop a “survivor’s perspective.” Participants will learn how to address the obstacles to recovery, both as individuals and as supportive communities. Attendees will discover how to use the “language of resiliency” to identify and reinforce victims’ strengths, thus positively impacting their self-perceptions and their life scripts.

The presenter is both an experienced counselor and a resilient survivor of mother-daughter sexual abuse.

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## **Obstacles to recovery:**

### **1) Denial and Ignorance**

- Denial in our society about the amount and severity of child abuse that occurs. This isolates victims who fear they won't be believed or helped if they disclose.
- Ignorance about child abuse and its effects on victims
- Ignorance about the possibilities for resiliency *and recovery* if/when victims receive appropriate help

### **2) Shame**

The threats and admonishments “not to tell” made by both the perpetrators and others close to the child, keep child sexual abuse secretive and shame-based.

The ways in which family members, the media and even some professionals interact with victims may appear to blame the victims. Often it is the shame that keeps victims from initially reporting and then it is the guilt for *not* having told that seals their silence. *All shame should belong to the perpetrator alone.*

### **3) Stigma**

Child abuse victims often encounter skepticism, disbelief and sensationalism when they speak out publicly. It is no wonder that most survivors guard their privacy.

*Any stigma or dishonor should belong to the perpetrator alone.*

**We can easily see how each of these obstacles impacted the recent Jerry Sandusky case at Penn State University.**

Some courageous outspoken survivors of sexual abuse: Elizabeth Smart, Oprah Winfrey, Marilyn VanDerber Adler, David Pelzer, Marlee Matlin, Laveranues Coles (played for NFL Jets,;sexually abused by stepfather), Sheldon Kennedy, (played NHL hockey; sexually abused, ages 14-19, by his hockey coach), Kayla Harrison (U.S. Olympics 2012 Judo Gold Medalist) and Aaron Fisher (victim #1 in the Sandusky case).

## **Definitions:**

**“Victim”:** somebody who is **hurt** or **harmed**—somebody who is **adversely affected** by an action or circumstance; someone **duped**—**tricked** or **exploited**; a **helpless** person

**Resilient”:** **able to recover from setbacks**; elastic: able to spring back quickly into shape after being bent, stretched, or squashed; able to deal with adversity

**“Survivor”:** somebody who **survives**; somebody with **great powers of endurance**: someone who **shows a great will to live or a great determination to overcome difficulties and carry on**

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## **Seven Key Steps to Becoming a Survivor:**

### **1) Awareness**

Victims need to first self-identify as victims and to gain a clear understanding of the trauma that they experienced.

*They can't become survivors unless they acknowledge that they were victimized—that something happened to them. (What is it that they survived?)*

By helping them tell their histories and accurately labeling the sexually and emotionally abusive behavior as intentional and wrong, we begin to take away some of the secrecy and shame.

Call the abuse by name and affirm the survivor.

- “Your grandmother told you that it was OK for her to touch your privates and you to touch hers. She lied. She took advantage of you and she sexually abused you. No matter what she said, *it wasn't your fault.*”
- “Your father raped you. He is the adult and he knew it was wrong.”
- “Your teacher sexually assaulted you and manipulated you into keeping quiet. He knew that what he was doing was wrong. *He* is responsible.”

### **2) Separation**

*There must be a fundamental psychological separation from the abuser.*

If victims continue to identify with their perpetrators, they may minimize the abuse, make excuses for the abuser and deny the degree of harm inflicted. Victims must perceive themselves as different from their abusers—not of the same character.

They must make the conscious choice to separate from their perpetrators; if they can't physically, then cognitively and emotionally. (“I will *not* be like him!”)

### **3) Connection**

Victims need opportunities to connect with healthy, safe adults: advocates, teachers, relatives, coaches, mentors and role models. Developing a meaningful relationship with one stable, emotionally available, supportive adult can be highly therapeutic.

Examples: “Big Brother” and “Big Sister” programs, CASA volunteers and youth advocates through churches, Scouting, sports and community programs; therapy, support groups.

These crucial connections offer friendship and validation plus the opportunities to learn lifelong social skills and personal accountability.

### **4) Responsibility**

*A meaningful, positive self-concept grows out of successful and successive acts of responsible behavior.* Victims gain independence by learning to be responsible for their own behavior. They need to learn self care, how to set boundaries, how to make sound decisions and how to effectively solve everyday problems. They need safe opportunities to practice being responsible. They need adults to supervise them, and to help them process their experiences and learn from their mistakes.

## 5) Empathy

*To become a survivor, one must demonstrate both awareness and empathy.*

Recognizing the harm done to victims is the first step. Developing *empathy*—the ability to understand and care about other peoples’ feeling—is crucial to breaking the abuse cycle. In order for victims of child abuse to heal, they must be committed to never repeating the harmful behaviors done to them.

## 6) Laughter—the “gift of humor”

To be able to laugh at particular circumstances requires us to step back and to assume a new point of view. Victims are distanced a bit from their emotional pain. Seeing the humorous irony in even the bleakest of circumstances is a powerful survivor tool—offering objectivity and emotional and physical release.

## 7) Compassion and love for self and others

The victim’s psychological, philosophical and spiritual interpretations of his/her traumatic experiences are critical, often overlooked parts of the recovery process. Victims did not deserve their trauma, whether it was rape (or illness or a death).

The “*Survivor Perspective:*” *We are defined not by what happens to us in life but by what we do with it.*” (--Anonymous)

“The abuse is a part of me but it is *not me.*”

“I may not forget it but I can work through it.”

“I *deserve* to have a happy, healthy life.” “I *choose* to have a happy, healthy life.”

Survivors contribute to making the world better and safer for others by fulfilling their individual potentials. Survivors transform their personal pain into constructive action. Survivors live rewarding lives of compassion and love for self and others.

Michael J. Fox, resilient survivor of Parkinson's disease; John Walsh, father of kidnapped and murdered son; veterans helping veterans through the “Wounded Warrior” program

## Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?

Upon observing a half glass of water:

- 1) “The glass is half empty.” *(Pessimism)*
- 2) “The glass is half full.” *(Optimism)*
- 3) “The glass is only half full but look--here comes someone to fill it up!”  
*(Optimism, connection)*
- 4) “The glass is only half full but I see a water fountain over there and I’m going to go fill it up.”  
*(Optimism, responsibility)*
- 5) “The glass is only half full. I see a water fountain over there and I’m going to go fill it up. While I’m there, may I fill yours, too?”  
*(Optimism, responsibility, connection)*

## **“The Language of Resiliency”**

Many people have a propensity for surviving trauma if they can learn to see themselves as strong, competent individuals. It is not just *what* happens to us but *how those experiences are described*—the language used and the complementary emotions solicited—that determines how we store the experiences in memory.

**The identical life event can be destructive or neutral or even empowering for different individuals, depending on their perceptions about themselves and the experience.**

Language-based intervention techniques to use with victims:

- “Strength-building”—deliberately selecting words that identify and reinforce victims’ strengths, abilities and skills, thus constructively impacting his or her self-perception, perspective, behavior and life script
- “Re-framing”—a conscious and intentional cognitive strategy that can be used to create a shift in perspective from “victim” to “survivor;” reinforced through repetition

What can you say that will encourage and reinforce resiliency? Case scenarios:

Anthony is 11; his little brother is 7. Three teenage boys followed them last night, threatening to beat them up. Anthony took his brother to a gas station and got help.

Mark is 14. He called the police because his dad was hitting his step mom. The police arrested his 6 ft. 220 lbs. father in front of Mark and his younger brother.

Maria, 13, was sexually assaulted by her brother (18) from age 6 to 12. She told her girl friends that she had sex with her brother and now they call her a “slut.”

### **Instead of:**

“Oh, I’m so sorry that happened.”

“Oh my God—that’s horrible.”

### **Try saying :**

“I’m so *glad you told* me.”

“It took *courage to tell.*”

“It was *not your fault*”

“*Now that you’ve told, things can start to get better.*”

## **Language To Reinforce Strengths and Build Resiliency:**

- “That was very brave of you.”
- “It took courage to do that.”
- “You made the best choice.”
- “You are a strong (*kind, caring, responsible*) young man (*woman*).

### **“Who?” guided questions**

- “Who have you connected with to help you through this?”
- “Who do you know about who survived the same kind of experiences as yours?”

**“What?” guided questions**

- "What did you do to get through this?"
- "What skills have you developed to help you cope with this?"
- "What do you tell yourself about what happened?"
- "What do you do to help yourself when you're feeling stressed?"
- "What have you learned about yourself from how you handled this experience?"
- "What advice would you give to other kids in your situation?"

**“How?” guided questions**

- "How do you make sense for yourself, out of what happened?"
- "How would your aunt (teacher, coach) describe you?"
- "How do you get along with some adults so well?"
- "How are you different from your \_\_\_\_\_ (the familial perpetrator/s)?"

**Open ended comment/question**

"Lots of kids have experienced sexual abuse (or whatever the trauma--violence at home, etc.) and come through it to be just fine as young adults. Kids have told me about some things they did that helped them get better. Would you like to hear about some of their ideas?"

**Resources:**

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